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ABSTRACT

Joint action among teachers appears to depend on the teachers' perceptions of their interdependence and the presence of opportunities for joint action. An urban middle school had been organized into teams on several levels with strong support from the principal. Three situations that altered these operating procedures provided evidence that teachers are more likely to cooperate to solve their problems when they feel their problems are shared and when barriers to common action are reduced. The three situations involved an influx of student teachers, turnover among members of established teams, and the appointment of a new school principal less committed to the team approach. The study suggested that three kinds of joint action can be identified: coordinated activity, conducted individually but similarly; accommodating activity, involving individual adjustments in response to others' needs; and cooperative activity, the mutual, face-to-face interaction of teachers to achieve a joint goal. This report concludes by suggesting that a larger study focusing on the conditions and factors affecting joint action rather than on visible evidence of teaming seems called for. (PGD)

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FAR WEST LABORATORY
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REPORT ON A PILOT STUDY OF SCHOOL-LEVEL COLLEGIAL TEAMING

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REPORT ON A PILOT STUDY OF SCHOOL-LEVEL COLLEGIAL TEAMING. By Judith Warren Little and Tom Bird. San Francisco: Far West Laboratory, 1984.

This paper summarizes the conceptual and methodological choices produced by a pilot study of school-level collegial teaming, and describes three of the pivotal events that led to those choices. These pivotal events involved (1) the presence of eight novice (student) teachers among an experienced faculty of approximately thirty-five; (2) staff turnover on established faculty teams; and (3) a change in building leadership. The insights generated by the pivotal events are discussed in light of past conceptions of collegiality and teaming, and in light of future studies of school organization, teachers' professional work, and the dynamics of collegiality.

REPORT ON A PILOT STUDY OF SCHOOL-LEVEL COLLEGIAL TEAMING

Introduction

This report summarizes conceptual and methodological choices prompted by a pilot study on school-level collegial teaming, and describes three of the pivotal events that led us to make them.

The pilot study is grounded in two prior bodies of work. Studies of the professional "workplace" character of successful schools drew attention to collegial relations among teachers (Little, 1982) and to the ability of administrators or teacher leaders to foster those relations (Bird and Little, 1983). Studies of teacher teaming underscored some of the benefits of teacher collaboration (Meyer et al., 1971; Marram, Dornbush & Scott, 1972; Johnson, 1976), but found organized teaming to be an ephemeral, unstable phenomenon (Cohen, 1981).

Norms of collegiality demonstrably related to the steady improvement of curriculum and instruction appear to be both powerful and rare. In prior studies, there was some evidence that collegial teams were more likely to persist where there was a "policy" in favor of teaming, articulated by the principal and backed by the routine organization of time and staff assignments. We were led to examine the conditions under which habits of collegiality might be introduced and maintained in schools. The pilot study was launched with these two questions:

1) How is a "policy of teaming" introduced, led, organized and sustained in schools? How is collegial teaming made an integral part of learning to teach? Of day-to-day professional work in schools?

2) What are the consequences of a "policy of teaming" for individuals, groups and institutions? That is, what are the intended and apparent consequences for the

recruitment, preparation and retention of able individuals, and for schools' demonstrated capacity to improve?

An Emphasis on Teaming at Harris Middle School

Harris Middle School, an urban school with an ethnically diverse enrollment of almost 850, was a favorable site for pilot study on three grounds. First, the emphasis placed by middle school philosophy on an interdisciplinary curriculum created a reason, in principle, for teachers to work cooperatively. The goal of an interdisciplinary curriculum oriented toward basic skills and concepts was firmly endorsed by the school's principal, who created a master schedule around core blocks of time and around teams of teachers and students. The principal stressed that a team of teachers was responsible, as a team, for students' academic growth during the year.

Second, the school's principal promoted an explicit policy of collegial teaming. Resource teachers at each grade level were team leaders; according to the principal, "It won't succeed if no one's in charge of it." The master schedule includes a common "morning meeting" time for all teachers before school begins. Team leaders scheduled and led morning meetings, and in turn met once a week with the principal.

Third, the school's leaders and a substantial number of its staff share a commitment to teacher training; the school served as a field placement site for cohorts of student teachers from a local state university that is placing increasing emphasis on teaming or "coaching" for beginning teachers.

Among the groups working together regularly and closely on matters of curriculum and instruction during the first stage of the pilot were:

(1) all eighth grade English and social studies teachers who, through the vehicle of a classroom-based reading demonstration program, had become frequent (if not always sanguine) collaborators on several curriculum projects;

(2) seventh grade English and social studies teachers, who, under the leadership of a grade-level team leader, were moving to emulate some of the successes of the eighth grade team;

(3) a group of teachers, students, and principal that had formed to plan a program in computer literacy and problem-solving;

(4) selected pairs of teachers, e.g., a sixth grade "core" team and two eighth grade science teachers, who worked closely together on curriculum planning and presentation;

(5) the cohort of student teachers, as an entire group and in smaller groups of two and three assigned to the same cooperating teacher; and

(6) the group of resource teachers or team leaders who, under the leadership of the principal, assumed responsibilities for curriculum development, teacher supervision and the direct leadership of grade-level interdisciplinary teams.

Altogether, these teams comprised 73% of the school's full-time faculty. The principal, though not explicitly mentioned in every case, takes an active role in several of the teams.

Three Critical Events

A small set of pivotal events prompted special action and special commentary from teachers, and came to have special theoretical and practical significance for the study. They have helped to shape our understanding of school organization, teachers' professional work, and the dynamics of collegiality.

Scenario 1: The Student Teaching Program. In this middle school organized around faculty teams, teachers act in concert on hard-won agreements about curriculum, instruction and classroom management. Last year, the rights of student teachers to "experiment" outweighed the rights of the experienced group to state expectations and preferences.

During the 1984 spring semester, Harris Middle School was host to eight student teachers from a nearby state university. In number, they were equal to about one-fourth of the full-time classroom teachers and about one-sixth of the total professional staff. Their presence, therefore, was consequential. Scott is an inner city school that "takes kids in two years below grade level and sends them out at grade level." While the school is firm about its commitment to teacher training, it is firmer still about its obligation to students whose academic resilience is not great. By all accounts, however, the sequence of events leading up to student teaching placements did little to establish order among the several relevant priorities, or to organize relations among teachers, university supervisors and student teachers, or to consider the school's collective orientation toward novice teachers.

At the end of the semester, the master teachers met to share their impressions of the semester's program. The meeting uncovered the frustrations of individuals, revealed commonalities of circumstance and purpose, and ended with an agreement to "get organized" with respect to student teaching. Within the first eight weeks of school in the fall, seven master teachers met twice on their own and twice with the university supervisor to arrive at a "policy" to govern student teaching in the building. A grade-level team leader volunteered to lead the group.

The student teaching scenario suggests three observations: This school has the social machinery for group work and group problem solving. When teachers find themselves with common purposes that cannot be readily achieved alone, or common problems that cannot be resolved alone, they have the opportunity, the skills and other resources to become organized. Group leadership by team leaders (themselves teachers) is an accepted and valued tradition.

For all that, this school was not organized with respect to learning to teach, or with respect to hosting temporary, inexperienced faculty members. In the absence of any felt reason to act collectively, teachers acted independently. It seems unlikely that any faculty will be organized around all aspects of their work. Organization and opportunity do not substitute for shared purpose and perceived interdependence. However, long-standing habits of team work make for rapid and well-orchestrated action when the time is right. One teacher said, "This is a building accustomed to group problem-solving." The school has rapidly become more organized with respect to student teaching.

Finally, getting organized required considerable face-to-face work as the master teachers thrashed out their priorities and preferences. In the crucial first stages of coming to agreement, the teachers met often, carving out time for four meetings in an already-crowded schedule. The written policy statement that they produced will serve to coordinate their independent activities with student teachers through the fall and spring. If their discussions and writings serve as intended, and their group leader fulfills her obligations to "stay on top of how it's working," scheduled meetings will diminish, taking second place to other more pressing demands on teachers' time.

Scenario 2: Staff Turnover on Established Teams. An established interdisciplinary team in a middle school is meeting for the first time with a teacher who is new to the building, though not new to teaching. The team members tell her that "our consistency is what makes it work for us." Introducing her to the beliefs, habits, materials, schedules and humor of the group is one of their main tasks for the day and the semester.

In the same meeting, the assigned team leader argues over grading procedure with a teacher returning from a year's sabbatical. Decisions about an approach to grading were made in his absence, and he will have to establish a compelling rationale to alter them.

In prior studies of teaming, turnover in team membership has been credited with eroding purpose and weakening resolve (Cohen, 1981; Little, 1981). The preferences and habits of newcomers have carried more weight than the group's priorities and policies with respect to curriculum and instruction.

This scenario calls attention to a shift in the relative standing of the group as a source of influence among individuals. Here, new members are introduced and old members welcomed back with deliberation. In a three-day summer planning session and in weekly team meetings throughout the semester, they are educated about the group's present priorities, orientations and requirements. They are assisted in mastering the group's shared knowledge and skills.

Group history and a record of past accomplishment carry considerable weight. Despite the group leader's sensitivity to consensus ("Can we get agreement on this?"), decisions of long standing and proven success are not re-considered with each shift in membership. Newcomers join a group with a tradition. Continuity of purpose and method is assured even when continuity in membership cannot be.

Scenario 3: Change In Principal. Grade level teams are led by team leaders, who in turn have met with the principal every Tuesday morning at 7:30 a.m. This year, there is a change in principal. The new principal has abandoned the Tuesday meetings, insisting that she could not "require" people to meet at 7:30.

In this scenario, as in related studies of instructional leadership, teachers' opportunity for joint action is hinged in some subtle and not-so-subtle ways to the pattern of initiative displayed by building administrators. In the past, Harris's principal used the resources of his office in large and small ways to push the value of team work among colleagues. Invoking "middle school philosophy," he planted the seeds of ideas that required group work to reach fruition. He scheduled morning meeting time and protected it against incursions by the district. He installed and cultivated the team of grade level leaders, creating a structure for instructional leadership that extended well beyond the principal's office. He joined and sometimes led group work among teachers.

Since the change in principal, team values, organization and leadership have proved increasingly fragile in the face of apparent administrative disinterest. The team leaders have tightened their own organization, working more closely together to compensate for the absence of direction and support they feel. They are uncertain that they can keep it up for more than one year; it is not likely that they will have the opportunity to do so. The principal's eliminating the weekly staff meeting among team leaders is one of several administrative actions which together reduce the resources that teachers can marshall in teaming.

Honing the Edges

Three pivotal events in a single middle school have been sufficiently powerful, or phenomenologically "dense," to require refinements in our conceptualization of collegial teaming. From a concentration on collegial teaming, we move to examine whether and how schools are organized with respect to teaching and its improvement. From a narrow preoccupation with visible cooperation among teachers ("teams"), we move to examine the multiple ways in which joint action among teachers can organize the work of teaching. The central question about collegiality thus becomes:

> Under what conditions would we expect to find relations among teachers that were rigorous enough and durable enough to have any demonstrable effect on conceptions and practices of teaching?

Conditions of Joint Action

Joint action among teachers is being studied, presumably, because there is reason to believe that something is gained when they do work closely together, or lost when they do not. At the same time, we encounter the fairly constant refrain in the literature (Cohen, 1981; Lortie, 1975) and in the field that occasions for teachers to work together jointly are scarce, fruitless, or hard to maintain. The pivotal events observed at Harris Middle School lead us to distinguish two necessary conditions:

Interdependence. Teachers are interdependent when they must depend upon one another, regardless of their own preference. Interdependence is not chosen, but is imposed by circumstance. The specific source of the interdependence may be important. It is one thing for teachers to depend on each other to observe the bell

schedule. It is quite another for them to depend on each other for information about good teaching practices, or for lesson plans designed according to shared pedagogical principles. To be relevant to their joint action, interdependence must be perceived or felt in some way by teachers.

This view is consistent with the perspective on interdependence characteristic of studies of student team learning or cooperative learning (Slavin, 1980), with some of the same implications for distinguishing between task and reward interdependence. The perspective taken here differs from that taken in some of the early teaming studies, in which interdependence is used interchangeably with cooperation, collaboration or co-presence (Bredo, 1977).

Opportunity. Joint action cannot occur where it is impossible or prohibitively costly in political, organizational, or personal terms. Bureaucratic conditions such as schedules, staff assignments, and access to resources may or may not be conducive to shared work among teachers. Cultural conditions including beliefs and norms concerning interaction among teachers may permit, support, or discourage teaming.

Interdependence and opportunity have no necessary relation. Persons can understand fully that they are dependent upon one another in some crucial ways that affect their respective reputations or other fortunes, but have no adequate opportunity to work together for mutual benefit. Persons may have substantial opportunity for work together, but be at a loss to understand why it is important that they should, or what would be sacrificed if they did not.

Character of Joint Action

While "teaming" may suggest face-to-face interaction among teachers, at least three main kinds of joint action with potential benefit to students might be distinguished.

Coordination. Teachers' actions could be said to be "coordinated" if, like points on a graph paper, their separate activities bear specific relation to outcomes of interest. Teachers may be coordinated if they all observe the school's bell schedule, or live up to prior agreements to emphasize selected skills or concepts in the curriculum, or employ a consistent set of classroom management techniques (which might have been negotiated earlier) that allow the school to run smoothly. In coordination, teachers' action is "joint" in that teachers separately orient their behavior to some common framework or third party. Coordination might imply but does not require face to face action by teachers; a school in which teachers' instruction was "coordinated" in the sense described here might well be considered tightly coupled with respect to instruction, even though face-to-face meetings and team teaching were rare.

Accommodation. Teachers could be said to accommodate each other when, unilaterally, they adjust their behavior to take each other into account. Ironically, perhaps, teachers may experience this form of joint action as a problem produced for them by other teachers. A teacher of one grade might notice that students from the previous grade either exceed or fall short of her expectations for students entering her class, and then adjust either her expectations or her teaching or both. Having detected (by student complaints about too much homework) that other teachers have given

students substantial assignments in a given week, a teacher might put back the due date of his own. Each of these teachers' immediate experience of the accommodation may be aggravation. Even so, the alternatives to accommodation should be considered. Surely the one teacher should not ignore the disparity between her entering students and her expectations for them; nor should the second teacher ignore the fact that students are overburdened with assignments in a given week. While these teachers and their colleagues might engage in some other form of joint action to gain agreement on expected student performance or the assignment of homework, that will cost them time and effort and they are unlikely to eliminate the need for substantial accommodation of each other in future.

Within some limits, unilateral accommodations to each other are part of normal give and take which serves to ease pressures, to take up slack, and to sieze opportunities in a human—imperfect—system. If both the costs of joint action and the accessibility of issues and problems to joint action are taken into account, reciprocal accommodation among teachers has affirmative prospects.

Cooperation. If coordination and accommodation may be distinguished in the fashion described, the term "cooperation" can be reserved for bilateral or mutual and face-to-face interaction among teachers which has the overt aim of achieving some joint product, such as a discipline policy, a plan for assignment of students, or a common method for planning and sharing lessons. Such cooperative activity might establish conditions for other forms of joint action. Teachers might jointly write a curriculum, by which they might accommodate each other over short terms by unilateral adjustments.

Consequences of Joint Action

Joint action must compete--for time, energy, and other scarce resources--with teachers' other tasks and opportunities. Whether joint action is sustained may depend on its benefits--from the participants' point of view. Teachers' sense of their own efficacy might gain immediately, for example, from forging agreements about matters in which they depend on each other. At the same time, those agreements may both limit each teacher's independence and expose her practices to examination by others. Teachers might see some immediate improvement in students' deportment as a result of adopting consistent approaches to classroom management; gains on tests may be longer in coming, harder to discern, and harder to attribute to joint action.

Within some limits, it appears, teachers can influence the conditions of interdependence and opportunity under which they work. If cooperation yields appreciable benefits, teachers then depend on each other more (or are more likely to perceive that they depend on each other) than before. If joint action is productive, then it may attract more support and resources, take a place in the normal working day, and thus increase the opportunities for teaming in the future.

Next Steps in Field Study Design

This set of distinctions appears to be useful in combination and to have implications for method and interpretation. If one had begun a study of the student teaching program (Scenario 1) at Harris Middle School in September, 1984 without distinguishing among interdependence, visible cooperation, and coordination, and with a set of measures limited to visible teaming, the group of master teachers

would appear to have been "unstable" and "ephemeral" when it ceased to gather regularly after its first four meetings; in fact, the group was better organized at the end than at the beginning to achieve its teacher training goals and to preserve the integrity of valued curricular and instructional approaches.

If "teaming" were defined primarily by occasions where a group of teachers proceeds democratically with full participation by and equal respect for the views of all members, the interdisciplinary team in Scenario 2 might appear to be questioning the competence of a new member and the team's leader might appear to be browbeating one of its established members. The scenario might be interpreted as a failure in team work. When the history is taken into account, however, it may be more correct to say that the team was explaining and promoting agreements which had appeared to pay off and that the team's leader was defending the team's investments of time and thought. That a member returning from sabbatical could expect the team to repeat its work on the grading procedure reveals the team's fragility in the presence of norms of teacher autonomy; members of more respected and powerful deliberating bodies usually lobby their colleagues before attempting to overturn a decision. From this point of view, the scenario is not a failure in team work, but is an instance of its success.

Groups treated casually by their members are unlikely to extract greater deference from others. The principal's stated reason for abandoning the Tuesday morning meeting of team leaders (Scenario 3) is simply that persons who have been meeting on Tuesday mornings cannot be asked to continue because the principal cannot require them to. While a variety of unstated motives might be attributed to the

principal, the surface explanation should not be rejected for that reason. The new principal has no way of knowing whether the benefits of the Tuesday meeting will outweigh the risk of asserting, by participation, a right to exceed district policy on the district's contract with teachers. The scenario highlights that continuity in teaming is likely to require greater deference to the traditions of the schools in which it occurs. If a school is to become "larger than one person" (Lipsitz, 1983), the potential risks to a new principal cannot be sufficient to outweigh a fledgling tradition of teaming.

The pilot study of school-level collegial teaming will inform the conceptual and methodological design of a larger study at the school and district level, which is scheduled to begin in December, 1984.

In subsequent stages, each of the major conceptual dimensions will be more fully developed, the relations among the dimensions specified, and the methodological alternatives and dilemmas explored in detail.

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